

Towards a Peaceful and Stable South China Sea

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Centre on Asia and Globalisation

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On April 24 -25, in collaboration with the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, [Centre on Asia and Globalisation](#) organised the conference “Towards a Peaceful and Stable South China Sea” in Nanjing. The conference drew experts from National University of Singapore, [China Institute for Marine Affairs \(CIMA\)](#), [Institute of Southeast Asian Studies \(ISEAS\)](#) Singapore, [National Institute for South China Sea in China \(NISCSS\)](#), [East Asian Institute Singapore](#), [Peking University](#), [Miriam College Philippines](#), [John Hopkins University Nanjing Center](#), [Nanyang Technological University Singapore](#), and some other leading research centers and institutes on South China Sea issues in the region. Participants were invited to present and discuss papers on a range of issues related to the dispute, and its implications. Professor Huang Jing and Professor Zhu Feng co-chaired the conference.

The conference mainly examined South China Sea issues from six angles: historical origins, country-perspectives, impact on regional peace and security, impact on regional economic development and integration, role of international regimes and governance, and the management of disputes. The discussion covered critical topics such as Arbitration 101: Philippines v. China, HYSY-981 standoff, “One Belt, One Road” initiative, building work on dispute islands, joint development in the South China Sea, and institutional work within ASEAN.

Professor Fu Kuen-chen, as the first paper presenter, examined the historical origins of the “U-shaped Line” and tensions in the South China Sea. He concluded that China’s position over the territorial sovereignty over the “Terra Nullius” by “occupation” of South China Sea islands and reefs (including Nansha Islands) has been indisputably confirmed. In the same panel, Ms. Katherine Tseng Hui Yi emphasised that nuances rooted in cultural and social contexts should be taken into consideration for negotiation among involved countries.

In the second panel, Professor Kuik Cheng-Chwee, Ms. Huong Le Thu, Professor Rommel Banlaoi, Professor Wu Shicun and Judge Gao Zhiguo further discussed the issues from country-perspectives. Most Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Vietnam, adopt a ‘hedging’ strategy to deal with disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam is particularly cautious over the disputes given its turbulent historical relations China, while the Philippine government’s foreign policy, especially China policy, is deeply influenced by its domestic politics. These countries might use their respective positions on

the South China Sea as a strategic leverage when dealing with great powers. Chinese scholar Wu Shicun suggested that all the parties respect each other's interests and concerns, and establish an effective mechanism to promote implementation of consensus on maritime cooperation in the South China Sea. Judge Gao Zhiguo made the point that the legal debate arising from the nine-dash line in the South China Sea represents a classic case of conflict between history and present reality. While China relies heavily on its long and over-whelming history to justify its title to territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea, other claimant states repeatedly stress on their under UNCLOS. The solution perhaps lies somewhere in between.

Regarding the impact of the disputes on regional peace and stability in Panel Three, Professor Zha Daojiong pointed out that "maritime issues" feature prominently as a key issue influencing relations between China and the United States. He further suggested that there should be closer military-to-military and navy-to-navy communication between the two countries. Professor Ja-Ian Chong reviewed renewed U.S. defence ties with Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines, while Professor Ralf Emmers focused on Japan and India's position in the South China Sea dispute. Professor Emmers noted that the dispute should be examined in a wider geopolitical context, even though it remains a symptom of geopolitical transformations taking place between China and the U.S. but also to a less extent involving India and Japan as well.

Looking at regional economic development and integration in Panel Four, Professor Ju Hailong stated that the South China Sea disputes do not influence trade, based on empirical studies. Professor Gaye Christoffersen discussed China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and its regional impact in detail. Professor Zhu Feng and Professor Huang Jing pointed out that with the heated debates going on among different schools in China, it is not useful to see 'China' monolithically.

International regimes and governance was the theme of the fifth panel. Professor Zou Keyuan referred to cases in the region and concluded that the main means of legal control to avoid and resolve territorial and maritime disputes is political in nature under the arrangement of legal documents such as treaties and other agreements. Resorting to international judiciary is rare, though there are cases which have been submitted to ICJ by East Asian countries. Professor Robert Beckman explained the invalidity of re-claiming islands through infrastructural development: this would not strengthen sovereignty claim to island under international law because of protests; they will not change status of features; they will not enhance claims to maritime zones from features.

In the last panel, Dr. Ian Storey looked at ASEAN and its role in the South China Sea disputes. He noted that ASEAN does have a consensus on the South China Sea, but unity is not easy to achieve for a fairly obvious reason: each of the members perceive the problem in a different way based on whether they are a claimant or not, as well as their relationship with China. Hence, talks between ASEAN and China on the CoC look to be long, drawn-out and contentious. Ms. Jane Chan focused more on maritime cooperation in the South China Sea. She concluded that the regional stability and security is based on the way with which challenges are met without being embroiled in existing political and strategic rivalry. The fundamental challenge is to balance the need to engage with all stakeholders, yet not be trapped in their political and strategic rivalry.

All the submitted conference papers are currently under review for publishing. With the objective of securing peace and improve stability in the South China Sea, this conference also marks the beginning of a long-term cooperation between the Centre on Asia and Globalisation and the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies that provide sustained joint research on South China Sea issues.

